

*Citation for published version:*

White, S 2019, *Towards more equitable interdisciplinary development research: five key messages*.  
Development Studies Association, UK.

*Publication date:*  
2019

[Link to publication](#)

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# **Towards More Equitable Interdisciplinary Development Research: Five Key Messages**

**A report by the Development Studies Association  
October 2019**

## **Towards More Equitable Interdisciplinary Development Research: Five Key Messages**

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The Global Challenges Research Fund has generated new interest in interdisciplinary research in international development, including amongst natural scientists, engineers and scholars in the humanities who have not previously worked in the global South.

What are the strengths of such research, and what are its tensions? How can we achieve effective co-operation between actors with diverse forms of expertise and national background, to generate solutions that will promote more sustainable and equitable policy and practice? How can we avoid research that is extractive and exploitative?

This paper presents five messages that are key to advancing more equitable and effective interdisciplinary development research. It draws on a series of workshops co-convened by the UK Development Studies Association (DSA) and Development Research Centres across the UK, which took place between October 2018 and April 2019. The workshops were co-funded by the DSA, the Economic and Social Research Council and the Global Challenges Research Fund.

## Five key messages

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1. **Profound inequalities between researchers based in the global South and global North continue to be reproduced through interdisciplinary development research.** To address this requires systemic action in research structures, processes, and personal conduct.
2. **To become pro-poor, research needs to work beyond conventional academic boundaries.** The drive to innovate within disciplines tends to lead to greater expense and complexity, not the cheaper, simpler products needed by people living in poverty. Shifting focus onto the practical outcomes of research makes clear the need for collaboration across disciplines and with local people. However, disciplines still dominate in academic measures of value.
3. **Social science needs both to frame and to ground interdisciplinary development research.** Understanding the social context is critical to both the inputs and outcomes of development research. But an engaged social science goes beyond this, to question how 'the problem' has been defined, and suggest other ways of exploring solutions.
4. **Community organisations, NGOs, technical professionals and ordinary people have their own 'Theories of Change' which challenge academic assumptions about knowledge, process and objectives.** Communities and collaborating organisations often know better than outsiders and have the right to be involved in programmes that will affect them directly. They should not be treated merely as sources of data. The problem is often not a lack of knowledge or understanding, but power and politics that block meeting their needs.
5. **Local 'footprint' is as important as global 'output'.** Development research should look to make a tangible positive impact at local/regional/ national level – and recognise its potential for harm. Too often, the research context is simply treated as a 'case' for extraction of data to tell a global story.

### A note on terms:

North and South are used as shorthand. Both are of course internally diverse, and their polarity is contested. 'Local' refers to where research is done, and is not a code for 'global South'. All such terms suggest a problematic fixity. As one participant cautioned: 'Those who are assigned as local may want to go global.'



## **Profound inequalities between researchers based in the global South and global North continue to be reproduced through interdisciplinary development research.**

The research agenda is still largely set by Northern funders or researchers. Northern partners are positioned as the 'owners'; while Southern partners are invited to 'join in' with a proposal already underway, as the 'juniors' or 'locals', and as the managers of fieldwork. In the worst cases, both research questions and methodology are set from the start, with little scope to reflect local conditions or respond to local priorities. The language is already saturated in inequality. E.g. what is a global challenge? Are issues of concern within a particular local context not 'global challenges' – and therefore unimportant?

### **Structures**

The following structural issues need to be addressed to begin to reverse the systemic reproduction of inequality through research:

- The widespread practice of the UK refusing visas for researchers from the global South, and especially Africa, must be ended.
- UK universities must cease claiming intellectual property rights over all research undertaken through collaborative partnership arrangements. The European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) must not be used to further entrench the control of data by the North.
- Due diligence processes applied to Southern partners make collaboration a major administrative burden and institutionalise a culture of distrust. To promote greater equity and a culture of mutual respect, UK universities need to be ready to accept higher levels of 'risk' as construed by conventional measures e.g. in commercial databases. See the University of Edinburgh's 'Risk Policy and Risk Appetite' as an example to consider.
- Research funding calls must involve longer lead in times to enable meaningful engagement in research design by global South and non-academic partners. Funding to facilitate this interaction between acceptance of Expressions of Interest and the final submission of a bid, is particularly helpful. However, this issue goes beyond the direct research funders, who often also receive money with short turnaround times.
- Overheads for Southern partner institutions must be set at a level that will facilitate the development of their research infrastructure.
- Journals need to be made available to researchers in Southern institutions: at present pay walls mean that sometimes they cannot even access papers they have written themselves!
- Meetings need to take place in the South, as well as the North.

There is an in-built bias within research where different project partners speak different national languages, but reporting is assessed by the ability to read and write publications in one specific language. This can 'naturally' lead to mother-tongue speakers leading on publications, and so reproduce existing imbalances of power within the group, and differences of benefit derived from the research.

### **Holding budgets: power or burden?**

Southern institutions becoming the budget holders appears one way of shifting structural power relations, but this can impose considerable burdens. Lack of research infrastructure in some universities of the South can mean researchers themselves taking on significant roles in financial management. It should be recognised that the Principal Investigator (PI) may be an administrative function, it need not be the research director. A Co-Investigator can be the person with the stronger research voice.

However, if funders require that funding is channelled through Northern institutions, this would require Northern universities to take on more risk, in holding the financial responsibility as PI with less control over outputs. Another trend, as donor regulatory requirements become more demanding, is that consultancy companies are increasingly taking the role of lead institution, with some (Northern) researchers choosing only to hold responsibility for intellectual leadership. The implications of the increasing involvement of consultancy companies in development research, as in other parts of international development, need to be closely monitored.

### **Shifting the dynamics of funding**

In the UKRI GCRF funded South South Migration, Inequality and Development Hub 2019-24, management is decentralised and the main budgets are held by the 12 country leads in Africa and Asia. The UK based researchers still co-ordinate thematic or comparative work packages, but their work in the migration corridors is on an invited basis, as and when needed by the country leads.

## Processes

The following process issues must also be addressed:

- Collaborative working should begin with research design and continue through to the communication of findings. Joint budgeting is a particularly critical aspect, to ensure that budgets for Southern or NGO partners are realistic, and involve time for research design, writing, translating and reflection, not just fieldwork.
- Research design needs to allow scope for development and deviation as the project evolves, to allow genuinely surprising findings to emerge. A lawyer said: 'When drafting law, we know to keep a law as vague as possible so you can make as much space as possible. Proposal language should be as broad as possible in the same way.
- Assumptions that 'capacity building' and 'mentoring' will travel from North to South need to be challenged. Instead, research needs to recognise and enable the sharing of the strengths of those in the South with those from the North.
- Practices regarding authorship differ across disciplines. Rights and expectations within a research team need to be agreed in writing in the initial stages of research. These should be monitored for equity in practice.
- Writing workshops or fellowships to support Southern partners who request and require them in producing peer reviewed papers need to be built into research projects, to help counter the many structural biases that result in Northern partners dominating high value research outputs.
- Peer reviewed articles are only one form of research output! Other means of communicating research, to be generated during as well as after the main research period, need to be valued and their production support.
- Transparent and safe mechanisms need to be established for team and community members to raise complaints and grievances and for these to be considered fairly and without detriment to those who speak up.

### **'Don't build networks and partnerships, build friendships'**

Good personal relations are the bedrock of good research, enabling differences of discipline, location or experience to become a strength rather than an obstacle. Long-term relationships which outlast particular grants are especially valuable.

However, there is a danger that these generate new exclusions. International networks tend to invest in the same partnerships over and over, often centred on Southern researchers who have studied in the North, and with the same small number of elite Southern universities, leaving scholars in other institutions unable to build up the track record required to apply for funding. Strong research relationships need to expand opportunities for others to join, not constitute a barrier to entry.

### **Who defines quality?**

One speaker described receiving a research report from a Southern colleague which did not conform to her particular standards. When she asked the author to revise, he refused. English was his 5th language! For her this was a real moment of learning, that she had become implicated in reproducing unequal power relationships. He was a senior scholar and yet she as a junior researcher felt entitled to criticise his work.

Another African scholar queried this conclusion. He felt the researcher should have met the same quality standard. He faces great frustration in making a lot of effort to produce high quality outputs while his colleagues do not bother. People who are used to high earning consultancy contracts may not be motivated by more fundamental academic research. Good and bad practice exist in the South, not only the North! So big questions remain about how value, quality and contribution are to be judged and managed. When might 'different' equal less, and when more? How do the ways judgments are framed constrain the forms of insight we are able to learn from?

### **Personal conduct**

There is much good practice at the level of personal conduct, but poor behaviour still persists. Examples shared in the workshops include a Principal Investigator insisting on being named as first author on papers where she hadn't written any of the text; a researcher who had previously collaborated with a community organisation later selling as part of a consultancy project the data the community had generated; a Southern researcher who protested against bad practice being accused of mental ill-health. Conduct also varies by context. Weak national and local structures of ethics and accountability can enable highly unethical research practice.

Greater reflexivity is required concerning actors' own positionality and the psychological comfort of repeating established patterns – for both North and South. Even when the funding agenda is open, for example, Southern institutions may be slow to come forward with their own project because of ingrained habits of thought and behaviour. Similarly, deficit constructs need to be challenged: mentorship should not be assumed always to flow from North to South.



## To become pro-poor, research needs to work beyond conventional academic boundaries.

Addressing a practical problem typically requires an interdisciplinary approach. This can be in tension with the logic of academic careers. As one person remarked: 'Leaving a legacy for the planet requires a lot more than research.'

Affordability needs to be kept front and centre in any planning for change. Incremental planning means being ready to do what you can with the resources that you have now, but in a strategic way, that looks to the longer term future. This relates not just to developing technical solutions that might not conform with ideal academic standards, but also building sufficient political support for the future you are working towards. A distributed economy approach, in which local needs are met as far as possible by local workers using locally sourced materials, can multiply the benefits of an intervention.

### Whose needs?

A Latin American professor of Design emphasised the importance of spending time getting to know people if you are to meet their needs – otherwise it may be that the needs you are meeting are your own. He gave the example of going into a favela where there were hazardous electric wires hanging above their heads. To him, this seemed like an immediate need for action. But the community's own priority was to have social space in their houses for entertaining guests.

Empathy is not perhaps what you would expect engineers to emphasise, but in fact they mentioned it repeatedly, especially those more closely embedded in contexts of intervention.

### Interdisciplinarity and academic careers

Combining different disciplines can be fun and exciting. Embedding interdisciplinary work in curricula at an early stage may help challenge academic silos. More junior scholars who have learnt different ways of working together can serve as interdisciplinary emissaries with more established colleagues.

However, publishing interdisciplinary work can be challenging, and few highly ranked journals are interdisciplinary. It is rare for interdisciplinary work to be seen as cutting edge within a particular disciplinary field. Interdisciplinary research proposals can fall foul of mono-disciplinary reviewing panels.

Emerging interdisciplinary scholars may find themselves not fully accepted by any group. International students in particular can find difficulty obtaining academic jobs at home having lost their 'disciplinary mooring.' This suggests it is important also for more established scholars, who can afford to 'take a hit', to take the lead in advancing interdisciplinary research.

## Social science needs both to frame and to ground interdisciplinary development research.

While the value of natural science or engineering is often seen as self-evident, many feel the case for social science still needs to be made. Some see it as just 'complexifying'. Social scientists must be able to say more than 'it's all more complicated,' and be part of devising solutions. But there is then the danger that social science becomes all about delivering solutions ('doing the people bits') for problems that are defined elsewhere. Social scientists need to take part in defining problems and generating solutions, and using social science strengths – including theory – to do this.

The limits of supposedly neutral technical disciplines must also be recognised. Examples given in the workshops include the following. Pharmaceutical companies have interests in framing responses to health emergencies. Combinations of notions of national prestige, technical prowess and commercial interest lead to over-sized dams that cause massive environmental and human destruction yet produce no more power than smaller dams would have done. Large infrastructure projects frequently both go significantly over budget and significantly under-perform.

The proper engagement of social science thus needs not just to ask 'how do we get people to accept this intervention?' but 'do we need this intervention, and does it need to be done this way?' One way to think about this is to contrast social science *for* a development issue with social science *of* that issue. This means social scientists need sometimes to take the lead as Principal Investigator, with natural scientists and engineers as part of their team.

### Questioning orthodoxies

Resource scarcity is often presented as brute fact, but interdisciplinary perspectives can dispute this. In the case of water, for example, whether or not there is scarcity depends on the scale you choose to measure. E.g. at all India level there is no scarcity, but there are political blockades between states. At Africa level there are a few pockets of absolute water physical scarcity, but it is mainly economic scarcity. Scarcity is also a political decision: that water can be carried to a capital city or an industrial hub but that it is not realistic to supply a rural backwater.

**‘Communication is key. We are wearing different lenses, but they all help us to see.’**

When natural scientists, engineers and social scientists work together, language is a common difficulty. Everyday terms in one discipline may be unknown to another, or the same terms may be used but have different meaning. Academics often find it difficult to admit not knowing and risk looking foolish. To work effectively together it is important to learn at least some of each other’s language and the thinking behind it.

While an integrated approach is often seen as the objective of interdisciplinary work, this can reduce all the complexity to the lowest common denominator. This might be a particular danger or anxiety for social science, where the expertise may be less clearly defined. Rather than integration, it can be more fruitful to recognise the distinctive contribution of each approach (e.g. the pattern-based models of environmental science, the maths-based models of epidemiology, and the people/participatory focus of development studies). These can then be triangulated through deliberative conversation.

The dominance of modelling raises particular concern, as it can import disciplinary biases without consciousness that this is being done. Models should be seen as devices to make sense of the world, rather than absolute truths or ends in themselves. Critical dimensions, such as the competing economic, commercial and political interests in large infrastructure projects that affect several nation-states, cannot best be understood by being incorporated in a technical model.

### **Questioning the Frame**

‘Planning has been replaced by projects,’ was a reflection on the field of urban infrastructure, and seen as resulting in lower levels of public scrutiny. This draws attention to the need to reflect on how issues are being constructed, and how this can shape our own perspectives and the scope for action.

Are tendencies towards commodification or privatisation structuring our ways of thinking? Cities exist because of public expenditure to support private investment, and this must be acknowledged. How can language that at once mobilises and obscures biases - like ‘investment friendly infrastructure’ - be contested? As one person said: ‘The conflict is between the narratives and who has the greater power to put their narratives across, more than it is between the people.’ In addition to encouraging individual reflexivity, social science may make a vital contribution in prompting reflexivity on the research process itself.

## **Community organisations, NGOs, technical professionals and ordinary people have their own 'Theories of Change' which challenge academic assumptions about knowledge, process and objectives.**

There is great potential for academics, NGOs and organised communities to work together for positive change. Critical to this is the nurture of relationships of trust and respect. Academic researchers are never the first people in 'the field' – key research may already have been done by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

Common values bring people together, but relationships will shift and need re-evaluation in the course of the research. Practitioners may seek academics to give legitimacy to their work, and academics may fear their independence being compromised. NGOs also raise questions about the value of academic research. It can take too long, be too narrowly focused, involve too many bureaucratic demands, and be more directed towards advancing academic careers than meeting needs on the ground. Research bids require time and effort and only a minority are successful. Some NGO staff fear that academics are only interested in practical outcomes because research funders have instrumentalised impact.

### **View from a small, North based NGO**

"I want to be asked what our research agenda is. Our Theory of Change. We are just used as a conduit to get to communities. I don't have a team to support me. When I work with universities, it's a faff. We need open, honest discussions about the work involved. We also become a conduit for communicating research. We need more acknowledgement, and more understanding of our logistical difficulties."

Local people and organisations must be recognised as knowledgeable and reflective, holding theories of how the world works, not simply being sources of data for analysis by others. As a CSO leader said: 'I get really annoyed when I am treated as fieldwork!' Academic dismissal of pragmatic solutions can cause real harm, when textbook recommendations are well beyond reach.

### **Closing the loop**

Long term research relationships may become 'multi-stranded', with feedback loops into teaching as well as further research. University students can benefit greatly from CSO or community members sharing their experience and analysis. Where these students go on to become, for example, the urban planners of the future, there is the potential for far-reaching multiplier effects. However, there is also a danger: that as some individuals gain recognition as speakers and experts, they begin to pull apart from the communities they represent.

## Local 'footprint' is as important as global 'output'

Care needs to be taken that the legitimacy given by academic ratification of people's knowledge does not simultaneously de-legitimise people's own knowledge in their – or others' – eyes. There may also be tensions between academics and people's organisations over outputs, as CSOs often have a more direct political agenda. So the question arises, how can the outputs be used politically in ways that funders or researchers may not be comfortable with but people on the ground are crying out for? Whose interests matter most?

Researchers have responsibility to the particular individuals and communities who participate in research, at a minimum to guard against any harm. The costs to those researched are often hidden, discounted or ignored. An African education researcher thus talked of her satisfaction when she heard people in the community where she had worked reflect: 'Here is one research where when they go we are not left feeling wasted.'

Sensitivity is particularly important in contexts characterised by broken or fragmented structures and vulnerable populations. The label 'post-conflict' can precipitate a 'stampede' of outsiders trampling over traumatised populations in search of a unique 'story' of sexual violence or other human rights violations. Giving information in highly political or conflict situations may entail significant risk. It is critical that outsiders don't assume they know what contexts may feel safe to research participants, but allow them to determine whether, how, when and where they share information.

### 'Accountability to each child'

For a South Asian NGO working on child sexual abuse, 'accountability was to each child' they spoke to, not just as representative of a category, but as an individual in his or her own right. Where there was not a suitable agency or other responsible adult to entrust the children to, this meant the researchers giving the child their own personal phone number.

### Global data storage

Critical individual data (e.g. on people who have been disappeared) that may be important post-conflict is often lost when representatives of international agencies move postings. Information should be stored in secure global archives, with a lifetime, not posting, time-frame. With increased reliance on digital data, and governments or organisations that might be interested in scraping data from computers, the need for a safe, global storage system for sensitive data has never been greater.

A different kind of vulnerability is associated with hope. People may consent to interviews because they have hope for things that the research cannot in fact deliver. Both development agencies and academic researchers need to reflect on the 'footprint' of development research.



### To pay or not to pay?

The issue of paying research participants raises strong opinions. For some, this skews the incentive to participate and affects how people answer. Payment to an activist may individualise a collective engagement, and make that person a gatekeeper who blocks other voices from being heard. For others a payment means appropriate recognition that participants are not able to work that day. Not providing payment could mean that the most vulnerable people are the only ones not receiving any material benefit for their part in the research. Timing of payment – as a post-research ‘thank you’ rather than a pre-research invitation – can avoid potential negative side effects. If you are an outsider, the question of who says what you may pay to whom is critical.

The pressure to do fieldwork applies at masters and even undergraduate level, and can lead to serious burdens for organisations which act as ‘hosts’ in ‘the field’. The starting point should be: Does this NEED fieldwork, and do YOU need to do it? Is there no existing research that you could draw on or challenge instead? A similar approach should apply during data generation: Do you really need to ask this question – will you use this data?

Sometimes, the most radical thing is not to do (primary) research.

## Conclusion

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Many of the issues raised above are very familiar. They reflect the fundamental challenge of trying to develop equitable practice in a context essentially structured through global inequality. Their familiarity in itself should give us pause for thought: we know these are recurrent issues, yet we still fail to act in ways that address them. While it is easy to fall into a reversal narrative - 'North is bad, South is good' - the reality is that we are all constrained in different ways. This should not, however, be used to justify inaction: there are examples of good (or at least better!) practice, and there are opportunities for all of us to 'check our own privilege', question our assumptions about leadership, quality and responsibility, and join collective efforts to change the structures that promote inequitable practice within our own institutions and through our governments' policies.

This paper has predominantly focused on quite practical issues, but in closing it is worth reflecting on some more fundamental questions that underlie these. There is a basic contradiction that many of the initiatives aimed at addressing inequalities in global scholarship - such as mentorship schemes for Southern scholars - can reinforce Northern standards of 'quality' or 'value'. Is the price of entry for Southern voices to become standardised in Northern terms? What does this mean for the kinds of knowledge that global partnerships produce and the kinds of selves and identifications that are forged in their production?

In this global era, clearly there is no question, for any of us, of a pristine primordial identity. Even the notion of Southern or Northern voices is problematic. All forms of identification emerge relationally and involve a composite, amalgam, or assemblage of elements forged in different kinds of interaction. But this relationality does not take place on equal terms. Some need to shift and accommodate new aspects of self more than others. So in closing, it seems appropriate to ask, what kinds of structure or terms of engagement would make Northern based researchers encounter in international partnerships significant challenges to their personal and professional identifications, default ways of being, and modes of practice?

## About this paper

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This paper draws on seven interdisciplinary workshops organised by the Development Studies Association and hosted by Development Studies centres around the UK, with funding support from the Economic and Social Research Council. The workshops took place between October 2018 and April 2019.

Each workshop had a distinct focus:

- **Zoonoses and One Health** (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex)
- **Ethical Research in Contexts of Post-conflict and Displacement** (University of Reading and University of Bath)
- **Frontiers in Urban Infrastructure Research and Action** (University of Manchester and University of Sheffield)
- **Responding to Environmental Change** (University of East Anglia and John Innes Centre)
- **Educational Inequality, Poverty and Development** (University of Bristol)
- **Water and Sustainable Development** (University of Bradford)
- **Towards More Equitable Interdisciplinary Partnership** (SOAS University of London).

224 people attended, including 40 from institutions in the global South. Social scientists were joined by engineers, natural scientists, architects, planners, archaeologists and lawyers. Attendees included academic researchers, students, development practitioners, consultants and policy makers, social entrepreneurs and research funders.

Thanks are due to all the workshop participants for sharing their experience, and to the ESRC for providing funding. This summary was produced by Sarah C. White. Further information and resources from the workshops are available on our website.

